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THE ROUND TABLE

INTRA-SECTION IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

Possibly the readers of the *English Journal* will be interested in the scheme which I "tried out" last semester with freshman students in composition in the J. Sterling Morton High School, Cicero, Illinois.

The class, numbering twenty, had been variously prepared in near-by grammar and parochial schools. At the first meeting of the class I assigned the pupils a one-page theme on this subject: "What I Take This Year and Why." I gave them no instructions, for I wished to get from them what would more nearly represent their natural and out-of-school-room knowledge of written composition. The papers, when handed in, were indeed diverse and discouraging. Could it be that the careful training which I knew they had received in the grammar school bore such fruit? I gave each paper painstaking and specific correction, indicating all errors by our system of marginal signs. When this was done I re-corrected the papers for the purpose of comparison on the following group errors:

1. Manuscript essentials (under which I included the appearance of the paper, penmanship, and artistic margins).
2. Spelling.
3. Punctuation (including capitalization).
4. Errors in English (ranging from grammar to diction).
5. The thought.

Upon this individual basis I divided the class into three sections: A, B, and C.

The next day I placed on the board a graph of the class's accomplishment in this test theme. I then released Section A, whose grade would probably correspond to 90 plus, from any theme work during the rest of the month. Those in Section B were to write a theme every other week, and those in Group C were to write weekly themes based on careful revision of the test theme. Those in Sections A and B were required to "prove up" at the beginning of each month, by writing another test theme.

Someone may ask, "What did you do with the A pupils when B's and C's were working on themes?" I did three things:

1. I gave them oral reports, often on the same subject that was used for the written theme.

2. I excused them from class attendance to prepare a report or a debate.

3. I used them as assistant teachers, to help the weaker pupils in the revision of the test theme or the writing of a new theme.

This division of labor in an English composition class seems to me to have the following values:

1. It aids the teacher by relieving him of unnecessary correction, and by giving him more time to work with the pupils who most need his help.

2. It aids the pupil of Class A by allowing him to spend time on the things in which he is weak.

3. It aids the pupil in Classes B and C in two ways: First: In the absence of his superior he feels free to express himself. Many retiring pupils "came out" surprisingly when the star students of Class A were either absent or engaged in other work. Second: Class division stimulates him to do better work, in hope of the exemption to be obtained, and because of the natural feeling of discontent that arises when he finds himself in a lower section.

It seems to me that personal pride could be strongly emphasized as a motive for better written composition. Slovenly English is as bad as slovenly clothes: both are personal bad habits.

The concrete results of this scheme, up to the middle of April, were as follows:

	Class A (90 +)	Class B (80-90)	Class C (80 -)
February test theme	3	14	3
March test theme	6	12	2
April test theme	7	13	0

Those in the lower part of Class B all showed marked improvement, and in the May test theme half the class were graduated into Group A.

The greatest pleasure this scheme has given me has been the opportunity for individual work which it affords. The longer I attempt to teach English, the more convinced I feel that written composition is not a class affair, but a reaction of two factors: the teacher and the pupil, the doctor and the patient.

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